New tools for environmental campaigns

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If Facebook were a country, it would be the third most populated in the world[1]. This illustrates one fact: social media has become the number one activity on the web today. These are the online tools and platforms that people use to share their opinions, insight and experiences. Facebook is the leading social networking site and is currently ranked first in worldwide web traffic[2]. As of July 2011, the website has over 750 million users across the world[3]. Therefore, social media marketing now represents a fundamental segment of the overall communication strategy of most organisations. To market a product or a campaign, social media can be used with very limited cost and under various forms such as Internet forums, blogs, pictures, videos or networking. On the Internet, the social and the informational dimensions are completely intertwined; the social interactions ensure the dissemination and promotion of the online information. Given the overwhelming traffic these sites generate daily, social media can be considered to have a real impact on the way information is created, shaped and shared.

Social media can also directly serve environmental communication. Several major international NGOs or organisations have already taken into account the importance of these new media for awareness-raising campaigns. For instance, the European Commission's successful 2010 campaign on biodiversity had a strong social media component. According to Sofie Verhalle, a consultant at Talking Heads, a Belgian social media marketing consultancy, "social media allows an organisation to target first a relatively small set of fans and sympathisers, thus creating ambassadors who then redistribute the information they are given and so on, in a cascading system". In other words, social media transmit information much more efficiently and cheaply than traditional communication models. Moreover, Ms. Verhalle also explains that the social component of these new media often gives extra credibility to a campaign. A person is more likely to join a cause if some of their acquaintances have previously joined the same cause, as most tend to trust a friend more than an unknown organisation.

Enhancing environmental communication through social media

An organisation which intends to launch an environmental campaign using social media should first start by preparing a strategy. This means establishing a frame of action, precise objectives, different campaign outcome scenarios, and rules for the team members such that they best communicate the general tone of the organisation. Furthermore, according to Sofie Verhalle, "the key to making an environmental campaign work is to ask for easy commitments" such as signing an online petition. "We have noticed that asking for a donation or a personal commitment did not work as well as asking for a less engaging action. Social media campaigning is therefore more adapted to objectives that do not seek to trigger complex actions."

In addition, the way in which organisations handle communication is crucial, and it is important that organisations be as courteous as in a press-relations context. "People tend to view social media as a private vector of communication, but it is not", claims Ms. Verhalle. Specifically in the case of environmental campaigns, supporters can often get emotional or aggressive, which can have a negative impact on the campaigns.

While social media is a great outlet for spreading awareness about a cause, organisations must be aware of certain risks and pitfalls.

The major social media websites

- Facebook: created in 2004, social networking, 750 million users.
- You tube: created in 2005, video sharing and video blogging, 300 millions active users, 200 million videos viewed daily.
- Twitter: created in 2006, social networking and microblogging, 200 million users.
- LinkedIn: created in 2002, professional networking, 100 million users.
- Flickr: created in 2004, image and video hosting, 81 million users.
- Myspace: created in 2003, social networking, 61 million users.

Major social networks logos: Flickr, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, YouTube.

1 : http://www.thetechherald.com/article.php/201029/5922/Facebook-population-equivalent-to-third-biggest-country-on-Earth
2 : http://www.google.com/adplanner/static/top1000/index.html
3: http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-20074198-93/report-facebook-has-750-million-members/

Tips to avoid traps in the social media jungle

Using social media for environmental campaigns implies risks such as pirating of ideas and data, identity theft, copyright issues, and lawsuits for defamation. This is why it is important, when launching a campaign, to pay close attention to the content posted online. Social networks impose a series of rules to users (organisations or individuals) wishing to use their website. For example, Facebook forbids content that "advocates against any organisation, person, or group of people". This requires the creators of a campaign to closely monitor their social networking webpage.

Social media is therefore a double-edged sword: while it can help positively spread awareness about issues, it also has the ability to disperse negative ideas and information. This can have an instant disastrous effect on a campaign's credit: for instance, criticism was expressed about the WWF Indonesian Forest Conservation campaign on social media, and it spread quickly. The WWF had to take these negative comments into account and to respond to them officially. It is possible to avoid these kinds of issues by monitoring closely, in order to react as swiftly as possible, and break any negative momentum. Preparing a Q&A is a good way to anticipate the negative comments.

The 'Detox' campaign on Greenpeace Facebook account

> ❝ *"The key to make an environmental campaign work is to ask for easy commitments."* ❞
>
> *Sofie Verhalle, expert in social media strategies.*
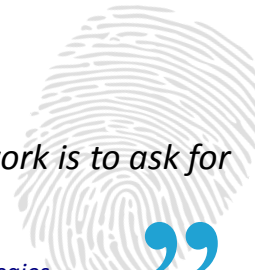
Using Social Media for environmental campaigns: from theory to practice

Greenpeace has become an expert in using social media to advertise its various campaigns. The NGO makes full use of the functionalities offered by the various networks. For instance, the "like" feature and "comment" box on Facebook have stirred immediate momentum by encouraging several hundred thousands of Greenpeace Facebook page subscribers to express their approval and exchange opinions daily on Greenpeace's Facebook wall. The platform is also used to circulate petitions, to provide direct links to the official web pages of their various campaigns (see 'Detox' for instance) and to offer jobs within the organisation. Greenpeace also uses different strategies to involve as many people as possible by offering supporters the ability to become occasional consultants by writing their analyses and advice on how to handle environmental disasters, such as oil spills.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) also updates its Facebook page daily and uses the network to advertise its various campaigns. The flagship 'Billion Tree campaign', for instance, offers a very interactive interface. It displays a counter showing how many trees have already been planted and how many are still to be planted to reach the objective of 13 billion trees. The page also displays a world map showing where most trees are being planted and provides concrete guidance on how to get involved in the campaign and help plant a tree. UNEP also encourages their "followers" to post links to smaller-scale (local or national) environmental campaigns, or share articles or videos on various environmental issues. Although both organisations effectively use social media, they have divergent strategies; UNEP, by nature of being an UN institution, is more limited in what it can or cannot communicate.

These examples confirm that social media are useful tools — and sometimes essential components to the success or failure of a campaign — that can be adapted for various objectives and organisations, but only if they are used with caution and a proper strategy.

Major Facebook features

- **Wall:** every Facebook account has a "wall" where it is possible to post comments, links, videos, games and photos. Once posted on a wall, this content becomes visible to the wall's owner and to the public.

- **A Facebook Friend** is someone who is added to one's Facebook network.

- **The comment box** allows users to see comments and comment themselves on any content posted by others. Comments are ordered to show users the most relevant comments from friends, friends of friends, and the most liked or active discussion threads.

- **The "like" feature** is a way to give positive feedback or to connect with things you care about on Facebook through a simple click.

- **The Fan page** is a special Facebook page meant to promote a brand, a campaign, a website or an organisation.